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Press's relationship to the CIA discussed

By Sheila Silver

Four men with extensive contacts in the intelligence community told a gathering of journalists on February 26 that it's just not realistic to expect journalists to eschew a close relationship with intelligence agents.

And 2 of them, both former CIA agents, disagreed on the media's performance in covering the CIA and events in the intelligence community.

David Phillips was recruited by the CIA in 1950 when he was editor and publisher of an English language newspaper, the *South Pacific Mail*, in Santiago, Chile. He estimated in the next 25 years he was interviewed by about 300 journalists. "And I've only been burned twice."

But John Maury, a former CIA chief and former assistant secretary of defense for legislative affairs, said "a long, consistent pattern of irresponsible disclosures" on the part of both the CIA and the press has caused grave damage to both. He faulted the media for sloppy reporting which he said has led to inaccurate stories about sinister growth of the CIA, the education of terrorists by American agents, and confusion about the identities and roles of CIA operatives.

"These are perilous times. The world now is more fragile, more explosive," Maury said. "Without good information, we are a blind giant in an uncharted minefield."

Phillips and Maury were joined by Joseph Fromm, deputy editor of *U.S. News and World Report*, and Dennis Berend, a former reporter who now is CIA Deputy for Media Relations. The 4 spoke at the winter meeting of the Maryland-Delaware-D.C. Press Association. The panel was coordinated by Ray E. Hiebert, dean of the University of Maryland College of Journalism and president of the Maryland Professional Chapter of Sigma Delta Chi.

Fromm said, "Intelligence people concentrate on people with information. If you're a journalist abroad, and you're ignored, you're a dummy."

"The best informed reporters find doors open to them and they'll gain access to inaccessible sources . . . Relationships shouldn't differ with intelligence officers any more than with other sources who provide information on an unattributable basis. They should be treated with skepticism."

Fromm recommended 3 tests for journalists who use intelligence officers as sources:

- 1) Protect the confidentiality of sources. Any violation jeopardizes the reporter's professional credibility.
- 2) A journalist should exchange only such information as he would publish himself.
- 3) A journalist should not share information for pay unless his publication, and not himself, is compensated.

"A journalist cannot serve two masters," Fromm said. "A journalist should not obtain information in his capacity as a reporter and then sell it for nonjournalistic reasons."

Fromm also urged reporters to discriminate between the "news tip" provided by an intelligence officer and "tasking," recruiting a reporter to gather information for intelligence purposes. "Accept such a tip with the explanation that any information derived from pursuing it would be reported to one's editor for publication," he said.

Phillips said intelligence agencies have found journalists abroad attractive for gathering sensitive information because they have a command of a foreign language, they have a "cover" that allows them to be persistent in digging out information, and they are experienced at developing and maintaining sources.

When he was approached 28 years ago by the CIA chief of clandestine operations in Chile, the CIA really was recruiting his press, Phillips said. "The combination of a clearable American and a printing press was irresistible." He began to work with the CIA then, and retired from journalism in 1960 to become a fulltime agent.

Phillips said journalists and intelligence people need each other. "Journalists and agents have symbiotic relationships. Both are chosen by their home offices to go abroad and report, to ferret out secrets, to report, on crises or to try to anticipate them."

"In living in 9 countries overseas, I always found there was a small group of Americans who knew what was going on: the American ambassador, his political officer, American bankers, American newspapermen, and the CIA information chief. So they got together and scratched each others' backs."

The main point Phillips made was that intelligence activity by journalists must be evaluated in light of the political contingencies of the times in which they occur. "To say you shouldn't have done something then because you wouldn't do it now is wrong. You as journalists have one allegiance, and it's to journalism. But it's a tricky business, and I hope you realize what it might have been like for you overseas 15, 20 years ago, and what it could be like 10 years from now."

Phillips said he "didn't hesitate" to sign a secrecy agreement in 1950. But since 1976, it's been CIA policy not to enter into "paid or contractual" agreements with an accredited member of the American media, according to Dennis Berend. The CIA "does not and will not" use media agencies as cover. But this policy does not preclude accepting information from media people who volunteer it to their government.

Berend abhors the notion that the CIA "used" the media. "I have a terrible problem with that word, with the notion that journalists were reduced to whimpering nobodies who lost the art of saying 'no.' I don't think the CIA ever has used people. It takes two in that gambit: the 'user' and the 'usee.'"

Fromm, Berend, and Phillips agreed that the journalist's job is to prevent "contamination" of news by intelligence officers. Fromm thinks reporters can accomplish this by observing ethical rules and remaining skeptical. Phillips said reporters would do well to weigh the "moral and legal" questions of permitting the news product to be usurped for intelligence purposes.

And Maury reminded the listeners that "Newspapers can't be true to their trust if they manage the news, picking and choosing what suits their point of view." He suggested that the media which hold a magnifying glass to public agencies turn it on themselves regularly. "Power can corrupt in the private sector as well as in the public sector," he said.

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